

Barbie Girls Cabaret: An Introduction

Marzena Lizurej



Fig. 1: Barbie Girls Cabaret on the cover of Wysokie Obcasy, the women's supplement to the Polish national daily Gazeta Wyborcza.

A lesbian cabaret would be an extraordinary phenomenon anywhere; it is all the more so in Poland, where public expressions of

the LGBT movement - let alone lesbian culture - are rare. Most male and female artists who might be included in the category of LGBT culture claim to be independent and avoid identifying with the movement. By contrast, Barbie Girls Cabaret overtly defines itself as lesbian. The group mainly jokes about lesbian lives, but it also performs skits on other queer folk. Established in 2005, the group initially appeared very seldom, but it has lately been performing more regularly at gay and lesbian clubs and LGBT culture festivals. Within the past year, it has also been spotlighted in the mainstream press and television. Poles love the cabaret - it is one of the most popular stage genres in our country. In addition to performing at a number of cabaret festivals and meets, groups tour the country with new programs. Significantly, the cabaret in Poland is male-dominated, with men frequently playing women's roles; women are a minority on the cabaret stage. Meanwhile, Barbie Girls is an all-women's group, though as yet an amateur one, and it is the women who play male roles. Allegedly, feminists have a poor sense of humor, and lesbians have none at all. Barbie Girls belies this stereotype. One of its numbers is a series of sketches titled "From the Diary of Maria Konopnicka".

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Fig. 2: Maria Konopnicka

Maria Konopnicka (1842-1919) was the patron of my primary school class. Most Polish schools have patrons. Since mine did not, every class was allowed to pick its own. I proposed Konopnicka. Of the entire pantheon of Poland's revered writers she seemed to me the most interesting. A mother who singlehandedly raised six children. An independent woman who made a living by her pen. A patriot.

In the communist era, literary education in elementary schools

meant reading carefully selected works by positivist authors who revealed the abject poverty of the Polish people. Maria Konopnicka was a prominent positivist. Her engaged prose accompanied schoolchildren from their earliest years. First they would read her tales ("The Dwarfs and Little Orphan Maria," "Going Blueberry Picking"), then her novellas and patriotic verse. At the head of the list was "The Oath" - a nationalist song, written under the partitions, when Poland - divided between its three neighbors Russia, Austria, and Prussia - disappeared from the maps. Under the partitions, Poles fought to retain their national identity by engaging in a wide range of retaliatory actions. When Poland regained its independence in 1918, Konopnicka's song was a serious contender for the status of national anthem.

Today Konopnicka has fallen from grace, and though scholars who specialize in nineteenth-century literature value her work, she is generally treated as a second-rate if not a hack writer. Even her fiction is no longer read, though in its day its originality was recognized (it was compared to the work of Maupassant and Chekhov). Her deep engagement in social and patriotic causes, her descriptions of poverty, and her efforts to counteract anti-Semitism fail to evoke an enthusiastic response. What was once a moving work in the school canon - "Our Nag," a story about hungry children whose mother is dying for lack of medication, and whose only joy is an

old, emaciated horse - turns off young reads hungry for light entertainment. The Pathos and other capitalized feelings (Patriotism, Metaphysics, Love of Country, Motherly Love, etc.) that peer out of the pages of her books repel contemporary readers.

Paradoxically, in her lifetime Konopnicka was the object of sharp critique by Catholic circles and no priest attended her funeral, yet today she is appreciated only by right-wing Catholics, while her songs accompany the annual pilgrimages to Częstochowa. Since I have always been drawn to those who fought - for freedom, equality, or justice - and whose life work went beyond navel gazing, I have had a soft spot for Konopnicka. First and foremost an engaged journalist, she left herself no room for individualism. As my understanding of art and literature expanded, however, I began to see Konopnicka as a dull old woman in wire-framed glasses. Modernist literature far outshone anything ever written by the positivists and swept aside political engagement. Indeed, the only people who cherish Konopnicka today are the conservatives who seek moral edification and patriotism in literature. The neo-liberal citizen rejects all things associated with the Polish People's Republic, including the work of writers like Konopnicka, because socialist propaganda promoted socially engaged art, simultaneously stigmatizing free thinking and art for art's sake. In elementary school we were required to read such stories as "Our

Nag" to understand how hard life was for the lower classes under capitalism so as to be able to contrast their lives with our own relative comfort and thus to develop a distaste for all non left-wing social systems.

After 1989, the cultural conservatism of the Polish People's Republic was replaced by the cultural conservatism of the Polish Republic, and socialist ideology was replaced by its liberal counterpart. But while the reading assignments in school have changed, the canonical authors still seem to be cast in bronze and fixed on pedestals. Even in Polish departments, biographical facts (particularly those considered unseemly, i.e. related to the authors' sexual lives) are shared as gossip in digressions. Biographical readings of literature are frowned upon as epigonic. Though every now and then efforts are made to demythologize the canonical authors, they usually fail. In 2007, when Roman Giertych was minister of education and homosexuality was declared the main threat to civilization (next to abortion and euthanasia), teachers were told they would lose their jobs for "promoting homosexuality." Revealing non-heterosexual facts about authors' lives, even if they lived openly as homosexuals, was defined as "promoting homosexuality." Artists' private lives were to remain a legend.

Maria Konopnicka worked exceptionally hard to earn her legend.

Following the great Romantics, she constructed it while she was alive, knowing exactly how she wanted to be remembered. She rejuvenated herself by six or seven years, and "used such lofty tones in her letters as if she anticipated that they would be published" (Szypowska). According to her official biography, after giving her husband Jarosław six children she left him and moved with the children to Warsaw, where she went on to publish under various masculine pen names (e.g. Jan Sawa), as well as under her own name. She traveled widely, never remarried because she devoted herself to her work, and was eventually presented by the Polish society with a mansion in Żarnowiec in recognition of her achievements.

The first crack in this official portrait of the female bard was made by Sławomira Walczewska, who wrote in her 1998 study *Damy, rycerze i feministki* [Ladies, knights, and feminists]: "we can only speculate about the relationship between Maria Konopnicka and Maria Dulębianka - painter and women's rights activist Yet though the friendship and sharing a home with another woman, rather than with a man, must have been meaningful for [Konopnicka], it is difficult to find any reference to this in her prolific writings" (152). Thanks to Walczewska, another woman suddenly appeared in Konopnicka's biography. It turned out that the two women had spent over twenty years together. Nonetheless, the

thesis that the author of "The Oath" might be a lesbian seemed too radical to Walczewska. It was proposed only recently by Krzysztof Tomasik in *Homobiografie* (2009). Tomasik pointed out that Dulębianka, who was Konopnicka's junior by nineteen years and wore masculine clothes (Konopnicka herself called her Piotrek [Peter]) and held revolutionary feminist views (she fought for women's suffrage and ran for parliament) might have been more than a friend to Konopnicka. Dulębianka was buried in Konopnicka's family tomb, only to be transferred to the Defenders of Lviv Cemetery (for she participated in the defense of that city in 1918).

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The series of sketches by Barbie Girls titled "From the Diary of Maria Konopnicka" reclaims Konopnicka for LGBT culture in an ingenious way. Confronting the strong public/private division in Polish culture, the cabaret presents a fictional/hypothetical diary kept by Konopnicka, first as a nineteenth-century boarding school girl and then as a mature writer. The diary is affected and sentimental, as we would expect intimate confessions to be in those times, and it employs tropes that were typical both for Konopnicka's work and for positivist literature in general: hyperboles and extended metaphors referring to God and Country, which wittily reveal the widely held

conviction about woman's inevitable submission to these two values within the framework of the Polish Mother paradigm, which was strongly promoted at the time and remains present in our culture to this day. The diary not only explores the contradiction between women's sexuality and the belief in the innocence of young girls; it also constructs places of women's entrapment (such as the boarding school for girls) as spaces where non-heterosexual desire erupts. The diary also jokingly implies that the patriotic writer's famous song "The Oath" may initially have been written as a lesbian erotic poem. Seen in this context, the figure of Konopnicka comes across as quite queer. Though she uses no identity labels, she takes an avid interest in relations of love and desire between women. As a result, while enjoying the hilarious sketches we are encouraged to reflect on the paradox that nineteenth-century women's homoeroticism may have been liberated (being unnamed and unnoticed by the society) while the woman herself was simultaneously disempowered and reduced to the role of a cog in the cultural machine.

1. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SA4wV_H9Zec
2. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ofl_ngY0ssU
3. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veT2YCfHXEc>
4. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fk6ChP5LLww>
5. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H9XVUiyz__0



Fig. 3: Furia as Maria Konopnicka

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